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A RETURN TO THE DAKOTA LAKE REGION

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

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III. AMONG OLD FRIENDS

THE TIME to find water birds on Stump Lake, as I had learned on my previous visit, is during the wonderful 'northern flight' in late fall; but as I must leave North Dakota before that, I went there for a week in the middle of July, hoping to find nests of the White-winged Scoter and to be able to explore the surrounding marshes within easy reach by the Ford that the good people of Hawk's Rest, with whom I had stayed before, had now equipped themselves. But just before my arrival, such heavy rains fell that the country was all afloat—from one point thirteen rich ultramarine rain pools were seen in the wheat fields! The road from the station over which we were glad to be able to make our way with horse and buggy, had to be abandoned at intervals for temporary roads through grain fields, and a place was pointed out where, when road work was resumed on a submerged grade, a horse mired, and on struggling slipped into the slough beside the grade, almost drowning before another horse could be hitched to him to haul him out. It was evidently a poor time for automobile explorations.

There was much to enjoy, however, from the green billowy terraces of the old glacial moraines to the wide band of greenwood back of the lake rich with memories of nesting owls and Purple Martins, together with the smell of new mown hay that came gratefully on the soft breeze after storms. All these and the kindly welcome and hospitality accorded me by my white-haired friend and her daughters made my week among old friends, both avian and human, a delightful one.

On reaching the lake, the White-winged Scoters were my first concern. Remembering that I had been told that they sometimes nested in silver-leaf bushes along the shore, I started out to look for them, accompanied by the friend who had helped me photograph nestling Marsh Hawks on my previous visit, a little girl, and two bird dogs which, in running around after Prairie Hens and other game, would be likely to discover Scoters if they were there. Walking along different terraces to cover more ground, we followed the lake shore for two or three miles until, on coming opposite the bird islands where the game warden said the Scoters were nesting, we discovered a pair of the Ducks making their way over to the islands. The lake was rough with white-capped rollers and they swam for some time against a current that would have made rowing hard work. Finally the black drake gave up and flew low across the water to the island, but the duck kept on swimming, rocking along with surprising rapidity. As we watched her closely with the glasses, it did not seem such hard work after all. She would ride up on the ridging wave, cut the foam with bill straight ahead of her, and then slide down on the other side, making it a chute-the-chute performance. One or two more pairs of Scoters were seen during the morning, but the strong north wind had driven most of the swimmers to harbor.

Early the next morning when a wide glittering sun path was gradually retreating with the rising sun, four Scoters started to come to shore. One female

when close to the beach began to bathe, putting her bill down in front of her and throwing the water over her back again and again until she was thoroughly soured, when she waddled up the beach and flapped her wings and preened her feathers. Imagining that she had come in to go to her nest, I moved cautiously from tree to tree and then in among the screening silver-leaf bushes for a better view of her. When the game warden drove by on the way to his boat, she flew out, feet outstretched; but on returning, began preening again. The other Scoters, apparently disturbed by the boat, went on down the lake, and later five sat on the water together. So preoccupied was the one on shore in oiling her feathers that when a young Gull rudely walked right in front of her bill, she never stirred. When she did stop a moment, it was only to look out over the lake where her friends were resting. Meanwhile five ducks, quacking like Mallards, flew over the next point and swerved off over the lake, small sandpipers picked along the edge of the slender sandspit, flickers called, and sparrows sang; but still the Scoter stood and preened. From time to time, getting restless, I looked at my watch. Would she never do anything? Finally, after an hour and a half of waiting, my patience was exhausted and I started for the farmhouse. Looking back, in the faint hope that, relieved of my presence, she would be making her way toward her nest, I saw her *sitting down* on the shore!

Another day I watched three female Scoters. Two of them must have been in old worn plumage as they had irregular white patches between the bill and ear such as museum skins of old Scoters sometimes show. One of the Ducks came up on shore and preened, and after a time a second one came up and joined her, waddling near as if for sociability, while the third swam idly along the shore. Once when I moved in the silver leaf the nearest turned and looked at me. This time I waited about an hour, but no one went anywhere. Evidently brooding time had not come, with these individuals.

Meanwhile I was waiting for the game warden to take me to the island to see sitting Scoters said to be so tame that they would let themselves be taken off the nest and photographed. But when the warden was not haying, the motor for his boat was out of order, and when that had finally been taken to town for repairs, something else happened and I had to leave without getting to the island. Unwilling to give up finding a nest, the morning of my departure I again went down to the shore and tramped vainly up and down through the dew-laden silver leaf behind which the Scoters had stood, looking sharply to right and left, remembering that the sitting birds are said to stay on the nest until almost stepped on; but finally when my time was up, had to leave, sorely disappointed.

To make up for this disappointment, while at Devil's Lake the next week, I had the good fortune to have several families of young of different ages come to the shore below the house. One mother came swimming along with twelve small young. At first she was taking the lead, then she waited while they fed, but tiring of that finally swam ahead out of sight, leaving them to dive by themselves. The young seemed decidedly black, but when they rose and flapped their wings showed white not only on the wings but on the breast, and in diving showed white under the tail in going down. At one time only two of the brood were visible, ten being below. When they had fed long enough, one of them took his mother's place and slowly led his brothers up the shore in the direction she had taken.

At Stump Lake, on the day when we watched the Scoters work their way across to the islands, we were keeping an eye out for old Marsh Hawks' nests, and Prairie Chickens and their nests. In the same large silver leaf basin and not far from the nest where we had previously photographed the young Marsh Hawks, my friend showed me this year's nest—more than two feet wide in a bunch of snowberry, rose, and silver leaf. As we were going along the lake shore, Jeff, the "chicken dog", suddenly made a point in the silver leaf—nose and tail straight as a ruler—and a Prairie Hen with white-bordered tail suggesting a Meadowlark—disappeared over the bushes. A nest beside an old hay road had been marked with a stone for me, and when it could not be found, the child who was with us and who was collecting stones, was questioned about it; but she replied with grave assurance, "I wouldn't take such a valuable stone."

When the nest was finally discovered in a bunch of snowberry, wild rose, and weeds, on its floor of grass and small sticks lay one unhatched egg and shells of seven others, four of them—as is often the case in hens' nests—with the two halves inside each other. The nest at first discovery had contained sixteen eggs, and at succeeding visits, for some unexplained reason, fifteen, and then fourteen. The mother who was only laying when first surprised on her nest, as my friend explained, "fluttered along a'ways close to the ground—didn't flop her wings as they do when they have young—and lit maybe a couple of rods from the nest." Later, when the little girl and her father found the Hen sitting, she flew up, "acting as if wounded," the child said.

In the winters, my friend told me, when it gets cold and there is a great deal of snow the Prairie Hens come close to the farmhouse. One was seen on the kitchen doorstep one morning, and a covey of twelve or fifteen close by. A covey that stayed around for two weeks, coming to bare places near the house and picking from tall weeds in the garden, were so tame that the family could watch them through the window, although if they opened the door to throw out crumbs the birds would fly.

By a snowberry patch near the road we twice flushed Chickens about a third grown. One that I caught a glimpse of when off his guard stood in a cocky pose, head high, and short tail up; but as soon as he saw me he crouched, making himself small as he ran down the grass-arched wheel track.

In the woods near the farmhouse where I had watched a Long-eared Owl's nest, Golden-eyed Ducks had nested for a great many years. When the boys of the family had been collecting eggs for the State University, I was told, they had taken two dozen eggs from a single nest—from one to three at a time—the old Duck keeping on laying to replace them; but finally the boys' father had made them stop, to give the Duck a chance to set. Three nests had been found by my friend a few weeks before my visit, two in trees and one in a stump. In the early mornings, she said, the six old Ducks would be seen circling around and around over the trees, flying fast, "as if exercising". Before leaving the nest, the Golden-eyes always cover their eggs, she added, "even when you scare the old Duck out."

One of the nests had been left not long before my visit, and some of the mother's down and bits of green shell could still be seen through the hole in the foot of the tree trunk by which the young had left. The mother herself always went and came at the top of the hollow, my friend explained. In another

er of the year's nests the eggs were so high that my friend, tall as she was, had to stand on tip toe to look in at them. A tree on the edge of the woods above the water had its nest hole about ten feet from the ground, and the old Golden-eye in taking out her young would start with wings spread, the dozen or more yellow downy chicks on her back and, as I was told, "take a slant right down to the water." Once when the old mother was startled, she made a wrong curve and the little ones all fell off. As soon as they struck the ground they ran and hid in the weeds, but as the onlookers stood still, the mother swam circling around, calling to them, when they ran to the lake, and as soon as they struck the water swam off, quite to the manor born.

At Red Willow Lake some years before, the family were sitting close to the nest tree of a Golden-eye, a tree that was close to the bank and leaned toward the lake—when the brood was taken away, and a graphic description of the departure was given me by one of the witnesses. "We heard an odd noise, part of it like the buzz of a bee, and K—— said 'Oh look, look, look!' and pointed, and we all looked up at the tree. The young were on her back as thick as could be, her back was covered from her neck, she was all bushed out with them. She seemed to start to sail down from the branches, not from the hole—she had worked out from the nest to the branches with those little Ducks! Her wings were spread and she kept up that buzzing noise—we thought it came from the old Duck; the little ones couldn't make a noise: they were hanging on. She just kind of sailed down to the water. It was worth seeing—to see those little things!" the genial witness exclaimed, her kindly face all smiles. "One little one slipped off," she went on, "and hung by one feather—it had its little head up stretched out hanging onto the feather. About two feet from the water, three or four dropped off—got tired and couldn't hang any longer. When she struck the water they all just seemed to scatter—like a flash they were all in the water—scattered in every direction. She began calling them then and we made a scurry down to look at them and K—— caught one and we all looked at it and then let it go. When we put the little one down it began to call and she called to it and—my, it scampered! Then she got on the other side of the reeds and it was no time before she had them gathered together. Then they'd swim around. They'd get tired and then they'd climb up on her back—a whole bunch of them as if they got there to rest."

Although I was too late to see the young at Stump Lake, when at Devil's Lake an old Golden-eye several times brought her brood to the stones on the beach below the house. The first time, she got there first and climbed up on a stone and waited till the little brood swam in. One small duckling who was behind the rest made a rush through the water and got ahead and climbed up on the stone beside his mother with a pretty air of being glad to get back to her. When the young were huddled together on one stone, their mother sat on another, but when she became absorbed in preening herself—throwing up her dark ball of a head showing her light throat, and rising till she showed her white belly—the youngsters dropped off the rock into the water and dived and swam—swam around at the foot of the rock and then went on along the shore feeding partly from the surface, partly below. The next day a slight noise from the water proved to be the ducklings chasing each other. The mother sat on her stone letting them play, and two of them finally waddled up on a second stone. But the Golden-eyes did not monopolize the stools. One day when the old Duck sat on her stone and three of her ducklings each on his

own, a Snipe sat on the next in the row, and Franklin Gulls on still others down the beach.

Among the birds of Stump Lake should be mentioned a Voice of the Night, for although no Bittern was seen there, at eleven o'clock one night, when I was watching the stars and enjoying the peace and beauty of the night, the stillness was broken by its remarkable performance, coming from a slough close by. So realistic was it that I could well believe the story of the Norwegian girl at Sweetwater, who ran in to her mother, demanding excitedly, "Say, ma, have they got a new wooden pump at Smiths? I could just hear it pumping!" In this case the pump seemed an old, squeaky one hard to start, though once started it went on with a goodly *pump, ump, ump*. "Its the Pump Sucker!" one of my friends exclaimed, and I congratulated myself that at last I had heard the Bittern's famous performance.

It was followed by Sora songs and a fast *cuck-cuck-cuck-cuck* ending with a slow *cow-cow-cow*, possibly from an awakened Cuckoo neighbor. Soras were heard on several nights between ten and eleven from a grassy slough near the house, and during a thunder storm one night they burst out into song, several singing together, one breaking out before another was through. They sang about half past one just before the rain fell and they may have been roused by the lightning. The next morning I whistled them up as I went along the wooded border of the slough, and sometimes three or four sang as I passed. But the Bittern, if there, kept silent.

While the Bittern's pump was a new and exciting experience to me, other experiences were pleasant reminders of my first visit to the region. The House Wrens were singing as gaily as ever, and two pairs at least had nests near the house, one in a bag of thin carpet tied to a branch, and the other in a split in the cushion of a wagon seat. "I've had them start to build, to put in little twigs in the shirt sleeves on a clothes line," my white-haired friend told me, adding, "we'd hang them out in the forenoon and when we come to take them in at night there'd be a lot of sticks in some of them." When she hung up an old coat the Wrens made nests in the sleeves and pockets and lining, and as she said, "some would be hatchin' out while others was still layin'."

Among the old friends, Goldfinches carolled as they rolled through the sky and Martins called in loud raucous tones from the woods where I had previously found them nesting. There was also a number of old threads to be picked up near the lake. On the shore near the site of a Spotted Sandpiper's nest found under a silver leaf bush on my former visit, grown young were apparently out of the nest, as I saw four together flying along the shore, and a pair were much disturbed when the "chicken dog" went running down the beach ahead of me. When one of them flew toward us showing its large breast spots, he chased after it, rushing out into the water where it lit on a snag, and afterwards following it on down the beach. A few of the gentle Eared Grebes with the pointed crest which reminded me of those I had seen along shore before—watched the "chicken dog" nervously, and after looking this way and that, dived, and swam under water farther out in the lake.

At sunset one night I saw four large hawks, apparently full grown Ferruginous Rough-legs, doubtless from the great ancestral nest I had visited four years before, standing statuesquely, one on a stump beside the water, two on a large rock close by, and the fourth on an upturned root, where from the distance their light breasts looked buffy in the evening light. Once a parent

was seen perching on a good outpost, on top of a bare dead tree crowning the high bank above the lake; and again one was seen flying in from across the lake, perhaps from a foraging trip for the evening meal of the young. The young were evidently well cared for. In coming up the beach past their perching stumps I found pieces of ground squirrel fur and bones on the ground. There must have been five young for when three had been seen by the lake, as I was going down through the woods toward the great tree containing the ancestral home, two others blundered out, crying in terrified infantile tones quite out of keeping with their big bodies.

Those by the lake had been well guarded by the parent perched high on the bare tree top commanding the lake shore. Big, vital, powerful bird, he seemed a Prince of Hawks, indeed! With keen searching gaze he had leaned down looking at me, showing his small compressed head, aquiline bill, and ferruginous, feathered legs. What a contrast in form and bearing to the other brown, white-rumped hawk—the Marsh Hawk—seen flying low, face down, around the neighborhood! The keen-eyed Archibuteo guarding his young made a wide inspecting swoop from the bluff in my direction and then silently disappeared. What a satisfaction that the patriarchal nest of these noble birds still honors the traditions of “Hawk’s Rest”! A worthy home they have chosen with its old over-topping trees commanding the lake.

And what a beautiful lake! In contrast to the Sweetwater Lakes with their shaded and marsh bordered shores, the charm of this large bare lake with its long sandspits at the turns of the bays was very great. Especially beautiful was it in the evening light when, in the west a wide band of orange light glowed above the green trees, which shadowed the bay, the eastern shore as it sloped widely back glowed green, and soft sunset lights rested on the open face of the water. A line of scoters swam out on the white water, a hawk flew steadily across the width of the lake, and my friends walked along the shore picking up choice stones and interesting bits of petrified wood, while I delighted in the beauty of open water and sky.

And what glorious nights! The screened porch was so high that it was almost equal to sleeping under the stars in camp, and in the cool pure night air, with the sky full of glistening stars, after the enclosing walls of a house it seemed like a return to an old loved home. We gazed up at the shining host, the bigness and wonder of the unnumbered worlds beyond ours growing upon us till my friend exclaimed, with awe in her voice, “To think they are all out in space!”

(To be continued.)